

30 May 2024

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
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Shutdown of the 3G mobile network

Dear Committee Secretary,

The National Rural Health Alliance (the Alliance) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Inquiry into the Shutdown of the 3G Mobile Network (the Inquiry).

The Alliance is the peak body for rural, regional and remote health in Australia, comprising [51 Members](#), and our vision is for healthy and sustainable rural, remote and regional (hereafter rural) communities across Australia. We are focused on advancing rural health reform to achieve equitable health outcomes for rural communities - the over 7 million people residing outside our major cities. Our members include health consumers, healthcare professionals, service providers, health and medical educators, researchers, medical and health practitioner students and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector. In addition, the [Friends of the Alliance](#) are a diverse group of people comprising rural individuals and organisations from which the Alliance draws input on rural and remote health services, policies and programs.

Term of Reference (d) Impact of the 3G network shutdown on the elderly and health compromised Australians who use medical alert devices on the 3G network

The Alliance takes this opportunity to respond to term of reference (d) of your Inquiry to highlight that digital health and connectivity are important enablers of the health system and access in Australia. Ensuring connectivity, in particular, is crucial to supporting improved health outcomes for Australians who make up the 30 per cent of the Australian population that live in rural communities. It is apparent, now more than ever, that connectedness and digital literacy is critical to the accessibility and delivery of individualised and comprehensive healthcare solutions throughout the country. However, connectivity, reliability, accessibility, affordability and digital health literacy remain ongoing barriers to enabling rural communities' participation in digital health activities.

Investment in telecommunications infrastructure in rural areas is known to have the capacity to improve access to health care. However, whether these improvements are actualised is intricately linked to issues around service suitability, reliability, consistency and affordability. On these measures, rural Australians continue to face significant disadvantage, and it is unsurprising that they are overall less digitally connected.

For further information, please refer to the [Alliance's fact sheet - Digital Health and Connectivity in Rural Australia](#).

The 3G network shutdown issue is amplified for people living in rural areas due to a number of factors, including limited availability of aged care and disability service providers, socioeconomic disadvantage, poorer mobile reception, and large geographic distances to cover in an emergency. While there are benefits in moving to 4G and 5G networks which are faster and more efficient with wider and more consistent coverage, there are financial implications for people needing to upgrade to 3G devices.

Impact on older Australians who use 3G devices

In relation to older people, the Alliance has received feedback that many:

- Are still using 3G or older 4G phones
- May have received second-hand phones from others or new mobile phones as gifts and may be unaware they were purchased from overseas
- Are unable to afford to upgrade their mobile phone
- Have emergency alarms that now do not work on landline systems so are heavily reliant on their mobile phone, but may be at risk if using an old model or one that may not be appropriately configured
- Are concerned about contact during emergencies if 000 does not work, while some are unaware that they will not be able to make 000 calls using their device after the shutdown
- Are concerned about apps on mobile phones, such as 'dementia reminder apps', etc. that are heavily relied upon and may be affected during the switch
- Are often not tech savvy and do not know who to turn to for assistance, at no cost

In relation to clients of the Commonwealth Home Support Program and the Home Care Packages Program, there are concerns with the timeframe and lack of support for the shutdown. Other concerns include the cost involved in having to upgrade 3G enabled Goods, Equipment and Assistive Technology devices, such as personal medical or alert alarms. Clients need to be made aware that they can access the support of an Older Persons Advocacy Network advocate via 1800 700 600 if they are concerned that their aged care provider will not meet the deadline for the shutdown, or if the proposed upgrade is unaffordable. Providers are obligated to assist clients to ensure continuity of service provision. People with disabilities face similar issues.

This Inquiry has highlighted the challenges with phasing out older mobile telecommunications technology to make way for newer technology, as well as the risk for people who still rely on outdated devices in an emergency.

From a day-to-day use, reduced connectivity impacts access to digital healthcare such as telehealth, online health platforms such as My Health Record and My Aged Care, and disability related support mechanisms.

The Alliance endorses measures to help people living in rural areas navigate through the changes so that they are better prepared for the switchover. It also recommends that the Government and telecommunication service providers take responsibility to support rural populations for the changeover. Australia has a social contract to do so, with this population often forgotten, indeed underserved and unsupported.

I would be pleased to provide further information on any of the information contained in this letter if you require it.

Yours sincerely,

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